

# Star-Telegram

A Yank in the RAF: Pilot saw WWII from a unique perch

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ADDISON -- A few weeks ago, on a warm late-winter weekend afternoon, two boys walked onto a tarmac at the Cavanaugh Flight Museum, a cavernous building filled with the silver shape of a massive B-29 Superfortress.

An old man in a motorized scooter noticed the boys' excitement and asked whether they'd like a tour of the aircraft, nicknamed "Fifi."

"Did you fly this plane in a war?" one of them asked the gentleman.

"No, I flew fighters," he said.

There's more to it than that, of course. A great deal more.

John T. Bradshaw went to war before his country did, one of fewer than 250 young men who joined the Royal Air Force to help preserve England when only it stood against Nazi Germany.

## A unique group

On June 5, 1944, the RAF's 41 Squadron made haste for a Royal Navy base near Portsmouth from its normal operational base of Lympne, south of London.

The men -- mostly Brits, plus a motley collection of pilots from Australia, New Zealand, the Netherlands and Scotland and exactly one Yank from New Jersey, Bradshaw -- knew something important was afoot.

At 4 a.m. on June 6, they filed into the pilot briefing room.

"This is it," Bradshaw heard the commander say. "We're going to do the invasion."

Each man was given a grid map of a portion of the French beaches where British and Canadian forces would land for Operation Overlord, the code name for the Allies' invasion of Western Europe. The fighter pilots, all flying the highly regarded Supermarine Spitfire, would spot for the battleships and cruisers several miles off the coast, helping them adjust their fire to the targets on the ground.

Bradshaw's coordinates were for Sword Beach, the easternmost of the five landing areas and the site where the British 3rd Infantry Division went ashore.

"I flew at about 5,000 feet, so I could see a lot of the action on the beaches," he said. "I was too busy to notice much, though. They took a lot of shots at us, but I didn't see a German airplane that whole day. All the action was on the ground."

## Finding the action

Bradshaw saw his first plane in the 1920s when he looked up from his yard in Morristown, N.J., and saw a passenger plane that looked a lot like a Curtiss Condor.

"It was flying right under the clouds, not more than 1,000 feet," he said. "It was probably going in for a landing at Newark. I can still see it today."

In 1940, Bradshaw tried to join the U.S. Navy and the Army Air Corps to become a pilot. Both turned him down because he didn't have a college background.

He enrolled at Princeton University to satisfy their wishes.

But it wasn't what he wanted. The Battle of Britain was raging in the summer and early autumn of 1940, when the Luftwaffe was trying to destroy the RAF and the will of the British people through a punishing air attack.

"One day my roommate came in and said there was an article in the paper that the RAF is accepting pilots for training with just a high school education," he said.

That's all it took for him to drop out of Princeton, break U.S. neutrality laws and endanger his American citizenship. The fight was in England, and Bradshaw wanted in it.

"I wanted to fight for England," he said. "My forebears were English."

In a few weeks, Bradshaw had traveled to Miami, Okla., as one of two Americans at British Flying School No. 3. There was a similar flying school in Terrell, just outside Dallas.

At the end of the 20-week course in September 1941, Bradshaw was the only American.

"The other guy -- Murphy -- washed out," he said.

The Royal Air Force put Bradshaw on the Queen Elizabeth in Nova Scotia, Canada, with 17,000 Canadian fighting men, and they steamed for England, unescorted amid the significant threat of German U-boats.

"It was a pretty rough trip, and almost everyone was seasick," he said. "I didn't get seasick because I had done a lot of sailing when I was young, but after several days on board with 17,000 seasick men, I was getting pretty close myself."

The U.S. still wasn't even in the war.

## Many missions

Bradshaw saw his first German airplane -- a Junkers Ju 88 bomber in the skies off the coast of southern England -- in late 1941.

He and his squadron commander jumped on it.

"He hit it, and it lost an engine," Bradshaw said. "He told me to have a crack at it. I opened up and hit it too. It went into the water in the channel. It probably would have gone down anyway, but he was a nice guy to share the shoot-down with me."

In one of his most memorable assignments, he flew air cover for the Dieppe Raid in August 1942, an attempt to seize and hold a German-occupied port in France. But the raid was a disaster -- the infantry losses were staggering, and the Royal Air Force's losses weren't much better.

"It was a fiasco," he said. "There was a lot of ground fire and a lot of German aircraft."

Over the years, during dozens of missions escorting bombers and strafing ground targets, he notched a couple of "probable" shoot-downs of German fighters.

But without a witness and a definite crash, they weren't confirmed. He took out a few more German aircraft on the ground, but that doesn't count in an official tally, either.

"We tangled several times with the yellow-nose Me 109s," describing the distinctive markings of several Luftwaffe fighter squadrons, he said.

In summer 1944, Bradshaw even took down a V-1 unmanned rocket, the "buzz bomb" that terrorized southern England as an indiscriminate killer of civilians.

He shot it with 20 mm cannons and sent it crashing into the English countryside.

He claims more luck than skill at that, though.

"Once I dived down on it to catch up with it -- those rockets were a lot faster than we were at cruising altitude -- it didn't take evasive action," he said.

## 'I was happy'

That same summer, Bradshaw met a young English girl at a dance. Her name was Doreen Hornby, and she came from Yorkshire.

Not long after meeting, they wed. Their honeymoon consisted of a small hotel and a weekend off.

Most of the Americans flying in the RAF in 1940 and '41 belonged to three so-called Eagle Squadrons, and all of those squadrons had transferred en masse to the Army after the U.S. entered the war. But Bradshaw never served in an Eagle Squadron and continued flying in the RAF into mid-1944.

"They forgot me, I guess," he said. "I was happy where I was, so I didn't do anything about it for a long time."

But after failing to rise very far in the RAF, Bradshaw decided to transfer to the U.S. Army Air Forces in August 1944.

"I went into the RAF as a sergeant pilot making 60 bucks a month, and when I left, I was a warrant officer making 98 bucks a month," he said.

"I transferred into the Army Air Corps as a first lieutenant making about 375 a month. My wife was real happy."

After a perfunctory interview with the commander, Bradshaw joined the 63rd Fighter Squadron, part of the 56th Fighter Group, a legendary outfit with numerous aces that became known as "Zemke's Wolfpack."

The Army gave him a P-47 Thunderbolt, took his picture getting into the cockpit ("in case we didn't come back," he said) and let him paint "Yorkshire Lass" on the fuselage in honor of his new wife.

The pilots of the 63rd Fighter Squadron supported the grunts in momentous battles like the Battle of the Bulge, Operation Market Garden and the invasion of the Netherlands, as well as bombing runs over Bonn, Berlin, Hamburg and Munich.

"I got to like the Thunderbolt," he said. "It was rugged. It could take a beating. But my favorite airplane was the Spitfire. It was an easy airplane to fly."

## A close call

In the spring of '45, Bradshaw's squadron was escorting B-24 Liberator bombers on a mission to Hanover in northern Germany. One of the bombers had been hit or was having engine trouble and couldn't keep in formation after the bombing run.

Bradshaw's commander told him and another man to drop down and protect the bomber.

Immediately, they began an air-to-air battle with a few Me 109s that showed up to finish off the bomber. In the confusion, Bradshaw's plane was hit by "friendly fire" from the B-24's gun crews.

"Everything turned black in the cockpit at first," he said. "I told my wingman, 'Stick with me until I can get some distance from the target before I have to go down.'"

The Thunderbolt made it farther than he thought, and he prepared to go in on a forward airfield in Belgium.

"I belly-landed and walked away," he said.

A few weeks later, the 63rd Fighter Squadron flew its last mission of World War II.

Between service in the RAF and the Army, Bradshaw's record includes somewhere around 136 total combat missions. He holds both the U.S. and British Distinguished Flying Crosses, surely one of the few people in the world who do.

"He flew every model Spitfire, and he's probably the only American to have that distinction," said V. Neils Agather, executive director of the philanthropic Burnett Foundation in Fort Worth who has known Bradshaw for 25 years.

"He's really something else. You hear people talk about how many World War II veterans are dying every week, and we're at the tail end of that curve now. We're running out of men like him."

Bradshaw spent the balance of his working years as a pilot for Pan American World Airways until he had to retire at age 60. He now lives alone in a retirement center in Dallas, arranging poker nights and bridge matches and volunteering with the Commemorative Air Force, an organization that preserves the aviation history of World War II, at the Cavanaugh Flight Museum.

His wife, Doreen, died of a brain aneurysm when she was in her 40s. He never remarried.

That was 38 years ago.

Bradshaw turned 90 last year, which never fails to catch him when someone asks his age and he responds with that number.

"I never thought I'd get there," he said, surrounded by all the medals and ribbons of a man who saw a war a long, long time ago.

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